

“Death or Forgiveness?”

New London UMC

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Exodus 14:19-31 *NRSV*; 15:1-21 *#135 UMH*; Matthew 18:21-35 *NRSV*

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What was the most over-the-top story that you heard in today’s scripture readings? If you’re thinking that the parting of the waters in the Book of Exodus was the obvious answer it’s probably because Cecil B. DeMille’s 1956 movie, “The Ten Commandments” has cemented this image in our minds of Charlton Heston with his arms outspread, the wind blowing, and the waters rolling back. Or perhaps you’re remembering a similar scene from the 1998 animated movie, “The Prince of Egypt.” You might wonder, “What could top leading the entire population of Israelites out of Egypt between those massive walls of water? And how, when they’d safely made it to the other shore, the water came back and crashed down upon the Egyptian army? The only other story was in our reading from Matthew – that little parable that Jesus told!”

But what if I told you that Jesus’ little parable about the king and his slaves was an even MORE epic story than the parting of the waters in Exodus? You probably wouldn’t believe me because Cecil B. DeMille never made a film about it! However, I think I can prove my point. Are you prepared to hear me out?

What led Jesus to tell that little parable was the question Peter asked, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” That’s a question that also runs through our minds when somebody has offended us repeatedly. Can’t we just **stop** forgiving them because their behavior never changes? Isn’t there an appropriate time when we can end the repetitive cycle of forgiving their sin, having them sin again, forgiving their sin, having them sin again, forgiving their sin, having them sin again, forgiving their sin, having them sin again, forgiving their sin, having them sin again, forgiving their sin, having them sin again, *ad nauseam*? Wasn’t Peter asking Jesus, “Will it EVER end?”

Or was Peter asking something else? Since the number seven is considered to be a holy number that represents completion or perfection (i.e., the seven days of creation), was Peter really asking, “When will I know I’ve reached complete, or perfect forgiveness?” And is that the same as asking, “How many times do I need to forgive someone in order to forgive them as God would?” Jesus responded, “Not [when you’ve forgiven someone] seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.” Or to rephrase that, “Not just perfectly! Your forgiveness must be beyond perfect, beyond counting, beyond even thinking about it because it will just be what you do.” . . . Imagine forgiveness being so integrated into who we are that it becomes **absolutely** how we respond! . . . But to reinforce this mind-blowing concept that we could forgive as seamlessly and completely as God forgives, Jesus tells a parable about a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves.

In the *New Revised Standard Version* it says that one of the slaves owed the king “ten thousand talents.” What Peter heard was a commonly used phrase that meant the largest possible number. So the slave owed an absurdly HUGE amount of money to the king. An amount SO LARGE that there would be no way he could live long enough to work long enough to repay it all. An amount SO LARGE that no king in his right mind would have loaned it to anyone, much less to a slave – because it was MORE than any king would own, and he certainly could not have loaned out ALL his financial resources. But Jesus said the slave owed this stupendously huge debt to the king – and (non-spoiler alert) the slave **could not pay it back**. So the king ordered that not just the slave, but the slave’s entire family, along with all of his possessions had to be sold. Then maybe the king would recoup the equivalent of a penny to a hundred dollars in repayment, if he was lucky? To us, it might seem like the king took a pretty harsh course of action, but at the time it was one permitted by law. A debtor and their family and all their possessions could be sold to repay a debt – but this was actually rarely done. . . . We might be more shocked by the fact that the slave had the nerve to fall to his knees to beg for mercy with the plea, “Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.” We know, the king knows, and the slave himself knows that he could NEVER repay his debt (no matter how patient the king might be) because the debt is simply just too huge.

And what are the odds that a king who has already ordered that you and everything you hold dear should be sold, will change that order? . . . Well, this is the same king who must have been incredibly generous if he loaned a vast fortune to this slave in the first place for whatever reason the slave had needed so much money. Perhaps this was really an unusually charitable king at heart? Maybe it would not be out of character for him to take pity on this slave, to have him released, and his debt forgiven? That being said, this was still a truly unimaginably magnanimous thing for a king to do. Just consider the crippling weight of that financial debt upon the slave and how the king’s forgiveness immediately lifted all that weight off. It must have felt miraculous to be unburdened just like that! To be given a new lease on life! We can only imagine the gratitude the slave had to have felt. . . . Or was he *not* grateful? Did he really think that he somehow *deserved* to receive such extreme mercy and forgiveness from the king? Did this amazing gift not impact or affect him? At heart, did the slave remain unchanged by the king’s extreme graciousness?

That would appear to be the case. For no sooner did the slave leave the king’s presence, when he confronts a fellow slave who owes him a relatively small amount of money and grabbing him by the throat, demands immediate repayment. The fellow falls to the ground to plead for mercy with the same words the first slave had spoken to the king, “Have patience with me, and I will pay you.” The slave who had been forgiven so much simply refused to show any mercy to his fellow slave. He left him to rot in prison until the debt could be paid.

This did not sit well with the other slaves. They reported what had happened to the king.

Not surprisingly, this news did not sit well with the king. He called in the slave whose huge debt he had forgiven because this slave had pleaded with the king for mercy. The king called him on the carpet for not having mercy on his fellow slave when the man had pleaded for it. And because of that lack of mercy, the king then held him accountable to repay his own entire enormous debt. Jesus finishes this up by saying, “So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from the heart.”

Now imagine what it would be like if every person in the world could forgive from the heart all the people in their lives who have hurt them in some way. If they could release all of the anger, the bitterness, the resentment, the fury, the pain that they have been carrying inside of them – what would that be like? Would it be like an unfathomably huge tidal wave of emotion flowing out of everyone? Would the release of all that negative energy create space for something more life-giving for each person AND for everyone? Could that space be where stronger and healthier relationships could grow with one another – and also with God? Could heart-felt forgiveness lead us to a greater appreciation and gratitude for the love and forgiveness that we have received from God?

Isn't Jesus' little parable the most over-the-top story you've heard today? And because on-going heart-felt forgiveness can be *more* miraculous than that one-up parting of the waters, it makes me want to say, “Alright, Mr. DeMille, the world is ready for our close-up, on-going heart-felt forgiveness that reflects God's on-going immeasurable forgiveness and love.”*

Amen.

**A nod to Gloria Swanson's line, "Alright, Mr. DeMille, I'm ready for my close-up," in the 1950 film, "Sunset Boulevard" by Billy Wilder.*